A Response to Nonaversive Behavior Management and "Default" Technologies

Cheryl M. Yates
University of Washington

In theory, and to some extent in practice, all forms of behavior management can be arranged in order of (a) intrusiveness, and (b) effectiveness in maintaining or supporting personal dignity. The highest (and most desirable) techniques involve minimal intrusiveness and maximum dignity. In an ideal world, all behavior change would be accomplished with such techniques. This is because "in the ideal world, treatment failures do not occur. But in the actual world failures do occur" (Iwata, 1988, p. 152). This gives rise to use of "default" techniques—less desirable strategies employed following previous failure(s). Both advocates and opponents of aversive behavior strategies need to combine their efforts and technology to develop more effective approaches. This includes development of more humane forms of controversial technologies because, "whether or not we like it, default technologies will evolve whenever there is failure" (Iwata, 1988, p. 156).

Recent work with positive programming, the preferred educational methodology, shows increasing effectiveness. Studies indicate its success in reducing challenging behaviors through development of communication skills (Durand & Carr, 1987) and teaching adaptive behaviors (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986). Also, utilization of nonintrusive and naturally occurring reinforcers has "demonstrated the efficacy of using contingent access to play materials as a reinforcer for academic work for children with autism" (McEvoy & Brady, 1988, p. 16). Additionally, McEvoy and Brady noted that the children in their study engaged in *appropriate* social play. It has even been suggested that augmenting functional skills may *prevent* future problems (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986).

Despite these encouraging results, empirical data do not yet support total elimination of less desirable strategies. "There is too little information currently available to assert that positive approaches are capable of solving all behavior problems" (Horner et al., 1990, p. 128). The reason, as LaVigna and Donnellan (1986) explained, is that "a strict positive programming approach to a behavior problem may not result in a sufficiently rapid reduction of that problem" (p. 36). Particularly in potentially dangerous situations, parents and courts may simply not allow behavior to persist long enough for positive techniques to be effective. "The debate should be not on whether to limit our use of the most severe forms of behavioral intervention, but on *how* that limitation should occur" (Horner et al., 1990, p. 130). Until research provides more effective positive approaches (and empirical evidence of their efficacy), less desirable techniques will continue to be used by default.

While we must continue to support empirical validation of positive programming approaches, it is also important to continue studying the conditions which give rise to their failure and the consequent need for traditional, more aversive methods. The value of refining and improving existing default technologies cannot be ignored. By better understanding not only the default technologies themselves, but also the circumstances under which they occur, "we might eventually do away with both" (Iwata, 1988, p. 156).

REFERENCES

Durand, V. M., & Carr, E. G. (1987). Social influences on "self stimulatory" behavior: Analysis and treatment application. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 20,* 119–132.

Direct correspondence to the author at 322J Miller, DQ-12, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98125.

Horner, R. H., Dunlap, G., Koegel, R. L., Carr, E. G., Sailor, W., Anderson, J., Albin, R. W., & O'Neill, R. E. (1990). Toward a technology of "nonaversive" behavioral support. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 15,* 125–132.

Iwata, B. A. (1988). The development and adoption of controversial default technologies. *The Behavior Analyst, 11,* 149–157.

LaVigna, G. W., & Donnellan, A. M. (1986). *Alternates to punishment: Solving behavior problems with nonaversive strategies.* New York: Irvington.

McEvoy, M. A., & Brady, M. P. (1988). Contingent access to play materials as an academic motivator for autistic and behavior disordered children. *Education and Treatment of Children, 11*(1), 5–18.